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Mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable development throughout the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report provides a review of progress achieved by the United Nations system in mainstreaming the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in its work. The second report on the topic, it is submitted pursuant to the mandates of the General Assembly and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012. Particular attention is given in the report to processes and tools that could boost the mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system. It points to the creation of the high-level political forum on sustainable development as an important development and analyses whether sustainable development approaches are guiding the strategic plans of funds, programmes and specialized agencies, as well as their operational activities for development in developing countries. The report highlights that recent developments in quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms have given a boost to the mainstreaming of sustainable development. Special consideration is also given to the role of inspections and evaluations in driving sustainable development approaches in the United Nations system.

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I. Introduction

1. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012, world leaders renewed their commitment to sustainable development and to promoting sustainable development for present and future generations. They outlined a broad vision that places poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge facing the world today and as an indispensable requirement for the attainment of sustainable development.

2. In the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled "The future we want", Member States agreed that the United Nations system, including international financial institutions, should support the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development (resolution 66/288, para. 91).

3. In order to fulfil the renewed commitments, world leaders recognized that the United Nations system needed to approach its own work from a sustainable development perspective. They therefore called on the programmes, funds and specialized agencies to mainstream the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development throughout the work of the United Nations system. In accordance with the request contained in paragraph 93 of the resolution, in 2013, the Secretary-General reported to the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, on the progress made in that regard (A/68/79-E/2013/69). The report provided reflections on the conceptual framework for mainstreaming sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system and identified achievements and challenges. It also pointed out that progress in that regard would enhance the capacity of the United Nations system to support Member States in taking forward the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals.

4. In his report, the Secretary-General also identified important conditions for mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system, including commitment at the highest level bolstered by clear and coherent intergovernmental guidance, and stronger coordination and policy coherence. Also critical were adequate institutional support, analytical capacity-building, and mobilization and allocation of resources to drive sustainable development.

5. As requested by the General Assembly in resolution 68/210, the present report provides an update on developments related to the mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system since 2013 (section II). It addresses institutional reform and the creation of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, which are expected to lead to coherent intergovernmental guidance in that area (section III), and looks at the role of inter-agency coordination mechanisms in mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development (section IV). The report analyses the extent to which mainstreaming is reflected in the strategic plans of funds, programmes and specialized agencies, as well as in their operational activities for development in developing countries (section V). It reviews recent developments in quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms as a tool for mainstreaming the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (section VI). Consideration is also given to the role of inspections and independent evaluations in

the United Nations system (section VII). Last, the report draws conclusions and provides a set of recommendations to further advance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system (section VIII).

II. United Nations system at work: an update

A. Translating sustainable development into the work of the United Nations system: practical implications

6. Sustainable development is not a new concept. Since the convening of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 22 years ago, sustainable development has become the overarching framework for the work of the United Nations system.[1] However, systematically translating that vision into practice is still proving arduous, and the way the United Nations system works does not routinely reflect the interlinkages between the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Organizations must work together to provide integrated support to help countries to pursue nationally owned sustainable development results.

7. In attempting to define in his previous report (A/68/79-E/2013/69) what "mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development" means, the Secretary-General indicated that:

> Not all United Nations system policies and programmes have all three dimensions; however, it is important that the potential economic, social and environmental implications of policies and programmes be carefully considered. This is essential in order to avoid unintended impacts, conflicting policies or unsustainable outcomes. It also enables the United Nations system to identify synergies and possible triple-win opportunities.

8. Mainstreaming sustainable development requires, first, the adoption by individual organizations of strategies, programmes and projects that include simultaneously all three dimensions and take account of their interrelations and, second, stronger collaboration among various United Nations organizations, notably those in the economic, social and environmental areas, in order to ensure consideration of all three dimensions when providing support to countries.

B. Post-2015 development agenda as a driving force

9. The post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals will have major implications for the way development is pursued at the national, regional and international levels. The United Nations system needs to ensure that it adapts to support the agenda. Success in that regard will depend in no small part on

[1] In the present report, the "United Nations system" is to be understood in its broader sense and hence includes funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments of the United Nations Secretariat, other entities and international financial institutions that are independent specialized agencies of the United Nations system. The "United Nations development system" refers only to the 32 funds, programmes and specialized agencies that are members of the United Nations Development Group. It thus excludes the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

the ability of the system to mainstream the three dimensions of sustainable development in its work.

10. Not only must such integration be realized within each organization but coordination and cooperation must also be stepped up within the United Nations system as a whole. This is essential so that the system can provide integrated support to Member States, grounded in the unique expertise of all the funds, programmes and specialized agencies.

11. The need for integrated support and coordination derives from a characteristic of the post-2015 development agenda. While the focus on the Millennium Development Goals will remain, the agenda will also address economic and environmental issues because it will have poverty eradication and sustainable development at its core.

12. The post-2015 development agenda will be both universal and relevant to each country, taking into account their varying capacities and levels of development. A question that will need to be addressed is how the United Nations can bolster the implementation of such a universal development agenda. This may require taking a close look at some of its focus and activities. It will be important to make close linkages between the normative and operational roles of the United Nations. The new universal development agenda may also require frameworks for operational activities that are more inclusive and flexible.

13. Governments have been explicit in stating that the post-2015 development agenda should effect transformational change that is ambitious yet cognizant of intergenerational solidarity. Implementing such an agenda will require intellectual and analytical inputs from the United Nations system.

14. A transformative post-2015 development agenda must be supported by a renewed global partnership for development and be bolstered by multi-stakeholder partnerships. It is important therefore to deepen the engagement of the United Nations system with a breadth of development actors while also ensuring that accountability mechanisms conducive to engaging widely in such partnerships are in place.

C. Mainstreaming specific issues in the work of the United Nations system: what has been learned

15. In his previous report, the Secretary-General pointed out that the United Nations system had mainstreamed specific issues in its work in several areas, notably gender equality and women's empowerment, but also climate change, employment and decent work, and human rights (see box 1 below).

16. Based on the experiences of the United Nations system in that area, the following can be suggested as building blocks for mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system:

(a) Strong, enabling intergovernmental mandates and guidance, with regular reporting by the Secretary-General;

(b) Systematic reflection of such mandates in the strategic plans of individual organizations;

(c) Development of a conceptual understanding of what mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions means and entails;

(d) Engaging of the inter-agency machinery, namely the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), through the expression of broad commitment and guidance and, as appropriate, the adoption of a system-wide plan or toolkits; the United Nations Development Group, to bolster mainstreaming at country level; and dedicated inter-agency groups;

(e) Clear methodology, guidance and tools on how to mainstream the three dimensions;

(f) Mobilization of United Nations country teams and system-wide capacity-building on how to use these tools;

(g) Strong system of accountability with adequate indicators and regular reporting.

17. More reflection is needed within the United Nations system and by Member States on which combination of the building blocks would be most conducive to mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations. It is important, for example, to consider whether a system-wide action plan or road map is needed. Section III examines recent progress related to intergovernmental guidance.

Box 1
Mainstreaming thematic issues in the work of the United Nations system

Gender

Efforts to strengthen gender mainstreaming have been undertaken in response to the series of United Nations conferences on women and gender equality. A United Nations system-wide policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women was endorsed by CEB in 2006. Two of the following three interconnecting and mutually reinforcing mechanisms have been developed as an accountability framework for implementation:

(a) United Nations country team performance indicators for gender equality and the empowerment of women were introduced in 2008;

(b) A system-wide action plan on corporate processes and institutional arrangements at the individual United Nations entity level was approved by CEB in 2012. Unified annual reporting for the action plan began in 2013 and the results will set a baseline for reporting to ensure the accountability of the United Nations system. Almost the entire United Nations system (62 entities, departments and offices) has, for the second time, reported back on a common set of performance indicators;

(c) The third mechanism — accountability for the contributions of the United Nations system to gender equality development results at the country and normative levels — is expected to be developed once the first two have taken root more firmly.

Accountability frameworks require heavy initial investments of time, resources and staff, suggesting the suitability of a phased approach in their development and implementation.

Consistent coordination by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), as a central hub responsive to the needs of the whole United Nations system, has been crucial to engaging stakeholders and supporting the effective communication and networking necessary to the success of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

The process has resulted in substantial advances in the performance of the United Nations system on gender mainstreaming. Gaps remain, however, and consistent and systematic efforts will be required to ensure that the United Nations system continues to progress, with a view to meeting the performance indicators set out in the Action Plan by 2017 (2019 for United Nations entities with a technical focus).

Employment and decent work

In the 2005 World Summit Outcome (resolution 60/1) and the ministerial declaration adopted at the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2006 of the Economic and Social Council (A/61/3/Rev.1, chap. III, para. 50), Member States decided to mainstream the goals of full and productive employment and decent work in policies, programmes and activities, with a view to achieving the internationally agreed development goals. In 2007, CEB endorsed the Toolkit for Mainstreaming Employment and Decent Work, and in 2009 a Global Jobs Pact was adopted to boost employment, production, investment and aggregate demand, and promote decent work for all. Most recently, the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development put major emphasis on "promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection" (resolution 66/288, annex).

Promoting decent employment is essential to achieving food security and reducing poverty. In recognition of this linkage, in 2008 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was explicitly asked by the Economic and Social Council to mainstream the goals of full and productive employment and decent work for all in its policies, programmes and activities. In response, FAO prepared a guidance note to help FAO field offices integrate decent work in their programmes, and in 2012 it published *Decent Rural Employment for Food Security: A Case for Action*, which provided a conceptual analysis of the links between employment and the four dimensions of food security. The International Labour Organization and FAO are now developing guidance materials and tools for capacity development as well as an integrated country approach for promoting decent rural employment. Dedicated technical guidelines to mainstream the decent work aspect in the FAO country programming framework are part of the official country programming framework toolkit.

The FAO reviewed strategic framework for the period from 2010 to 2019, which was approved by the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations at its thirty-eighth session, gives increased importance to decent rural employment. Around 60 countries have already referred explicitly to employment priorities in framing their collaboration with FAO under their respective country programming frameworks.

III. Changing intergovernmental landscape

18. The first building block for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system is intergovernmental guidance. There have been important developments in that regard. In September 2013, the high-level political forum on sustainable development met for the first time. Established at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the forum is expected to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development, follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments, enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges (resolution 67/290, para. 2).

19. The guidance of the forum will thus greatly benefit the efforts of the United Nations system to develop a common vision and agenda for reform aimed at helping countries to adopt coherent strategies for sustainable development.

20. It will also be important for the United Nations system to support the deliberations of the nascent forum, be a partner in the implementation of decisions and report back on challenges and achievements. The forum will conduct regular reviews on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments as of 2016. These will include developed and developing countries but also reviews of relevant United Nations entities. If prepared and conducted effectively, the United Nations system reviews could provide important opportunities to discuss, for example, whether small groups of organizations are providing integrated support to Member States in a given area and whether individual organizations are mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions in their work. The forum will need to decide on how it will conduct these reviews so that they lead to meaningful evaluations and findings. The peer reviews conducted in the context of the Environment Management Group, although focused on environmental sustainable management, could provide one example of how to conduct reviews.

21. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Members States also decided to strengthen the role of the Economic and Social Council in coordinating the follow-up to the outcomes of major conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields, and in promoting the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development (resolution 68/1). The strengthening of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the decision to make its governing body universal — with the establishment of the

United Nations Environment Assembly (pursuant to resolutions 66/288, 67/213 and 67/251) — is also expected to advance the mainstreaming of environmental dimensions within the United Nations system.

22. The coming year will be important in determining how to ensure complementarity and synergies among the various intergovernmental platforms as they deliver on their mandates.

23. The regional commissions have started to organize annual regional forums on sustainable development as a way to channel regional perspectives on sustainable development directly into the discussions of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, which are held in New York. The regional commissions have worked with the regional coordination mechanism they convene to help to shape regional positions on the sustainable development goals. This was done, for example, at the recent Arab high-level forum on sustainable development organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, will pilot the mainstreaming of sustainable development in its thirty-fifth session, to be held in 2014 in Lima.

IV. Role of inter-agency coordination mechanisms in mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development

24. The engagement of inter-agency bodies is another building block for integrating the three dimensions in the work of the United Nations systems. Several United Nations system inter-agency mechanisms are presently focused on helping Member States to develop sustainable development goals.

25. The United Nations System Task Team on the Post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda has prepared 29 issues briefs for the stocktaking phase of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.

26. Theme- and sector-specific coordination mechanisms such as UN-Water and UN-Energy are likewise contributing to the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda.

27. CEB and its subsidiary bodies are engaged in a reflection on how best the United Nations system can support Member States as they transition to a post-2015 development agenda centred on sustainable development. The High-level Committee on Programmes is assisting CEB in fostering an integrated response to the challenges and opportunities faced by the United Nations system as it defines its own contribution within a changed development policy environment. One of the challenges identified is the need for the coherent integration of policies across the three dimensions of sustainable development, within the context of the United Nations mandate of peace and security, development, human rights and the rule of law.

28. Both in the run-up to and following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012, the United Nations system has made significant advances in mainstreaming environmental dimensions in its work. The work of the Environment Management Group on the framework for advancing environmental and social sustainability in the United Nations system is of particular relevance.

29. The framework contains possible actions for strengthening the environmental and social sustainability of (i) strategies and policies; (ii) operational activities, by means of programmes and projects; and (iii) administrative decisions of the United Nations system, such as facilities management. In his 2013 report, the Secretary-General noted the importance of the framework as a possible point of departure for mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development. In that context, however, the framework will need to be further elaborated to address the three dimensions of sustainable development and will need to be tested. United Nations system inter-agency bodies are currently discussing options for the follow-up of the framework by the United Nations system, and the Environment Management Group is continuing to develop guidance on the implementation of the framework.

30. In the view of some organizations, there is a need for greater clarity on how to mainstream social and economic dimensions in certain areas.

31. The High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis[2] provides an example of how various United Nations system organizations and other actors can join forces to address an issue from an economic, social and environmental perspective. The work of the High-level Task Force contributed to the alignment of humanitarian responses to the 2008 food price crisis. It also fed into subsequent longer term efforts within national Governments and regional organizations, as well as into specific initiatives of the Group of Eight and the Group of Twenty. Since 2012, the High-level Task Force has focused on providing support to countries, cities and communities that have embraced the Zero Hunger Challenge initiative, which was launched by the Secretary-General at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development as the basis for a coherent approach to food and nutrition security that integrates all of the dimensions of sustainable development (see box 2 below).

32. A number of lessons can be learned from the approach of the High-level Task Force, for example: the important impact that results when United Nations agencies with different mandates coalesce around a common objective; and the importance of incorporating a partnerships approach to problem-solving, which enables organizations and social groups with very different compositions, mandates, needs, capacities and strengths to develop fully inclusive perspectives and solutions.

Box 2
Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in a specific area: the case of food security

In 2008, in response to the global food crisis, a number of funds, programmes and agencies of the United Nations system, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Trade Organization joined forces to develop a Comprehensive Framework for Action on food and nutrition security. The Comprehensive Framework for Action served as the basis for comprehensive, coherent, strategic and unified action across the United Nations system. The work of the High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis continues today.

[2] The High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, established by the Secretary-General, brings together the heads of 23 United Nations system entities, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Chief Executive of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Trade Organization.

The Comprehensive Framework for Action was designed to be of use to Governments, international and regional organizations, and others with an interest in food security. It consisted of a range of policies and strategies that could be adapted to different settings and jointly implemented by multiple stakeholders to respond to the immediate needs of vulnerable populations and contribute to longer-term resilience.

In March 2012, in the run-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the High-level Task Force produced a common United Nations system-wide position entitled "Food and nutrition security for all through sustainable agriculture and food systems".

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the Secretary-General launched the Zero Hunger Challenge, an invitation both to Governments and all other stakeholders to commit to actions that will bring an end to hunger. The holistic vision of the Zero Hunger Challenge fully integrates the three pillars of sustainable development in its five objectives, which are: ensuring 100 per cent access to adequate food all year round; eliminating stunting in children under the age of two; ensuring that food systems are sustainable; increasing smallholder productivity and income; and reducing food loss and waste.

In 2012, the High-level Task Force was reoriented to focus on providing support to countries, cities and communities that have embraced the Zero Hunger Challenge initiative.

33. The focus of the inter-agency machinery is currently on both supporting the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda and on preparing the United Nations system for supporting implementation when the agenda is adopted. Further directions on mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system may be expected as a result of that process.

V. Strategic orientations in the funds, programmes and specialized agencies, and in operational activities for development

A. Strategic plans and policies of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies

34. If sustainable development is to be the guiding framework for United Nations system organizations, it has to be established in the strategic plans of the organizations. This is clearly another building block for integrating the three dimensions in the work of the United Nations system. Regarding operational activities in particular, the strategic orientations of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies are guided by the 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for the development of the United Nations system (resolution 67/226). In that review, the General Assembly reiterated the call of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development for United Nations

organizations to "further enhance the mainstreaming of sustainable development into their respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes in support of the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development" (resolution 67/226, para. 14).

35. Several United Nations funds and programmes, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, UNEP and the World Food Programme, have either adopted their strategic plans for the period 2014-2017 or are in the process of finalizing them. Other United Nations organizations, including the specialized agencies, are updating their existing policy frameworks and management plans to take into account the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the quadrennial comprehensive policy review. A review of the draft strategic plans and policy papers of several organizations reveals notable progress as well as challenges in mainstreaming sustainable development in the strategic planning of the United Nations development system.

36. It needs to be acknowledged that not all organizations require major adjustments since their mandates and areas of work already integrate environmental, social and economic dimensions. Such is the case, for example, for FAO. In its reviewed strategic framework for the period 2010-2019, FAO developed a vision that mainstreams sustainable development in a balanced manner. It therefore undertakes to achieve a world free of hunger and malnutrition, where food and agriculture contribute to improving the living standards of all, especially the poorest, in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner.

37. Similarly, the title of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization's medium-term programme framework 2010-2013 is "Industrial development for poverty reduction, inclusive globalization and environmental sustainability. The document calls on the organization to address three major global challenges, namely, poverty and inequality, uneven globalization, and environmental degradation and climate change. At the fifteenth session of the General Conference of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, held in Lima in December 2013, its member States reinforced the link between the three dimensions of sustainable development outlined in the organization's mandate by adopting the Lima Declaration entitled "Towards inclusive and sustainable industrial development".

38. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization adopted an integrated approach contributing to sustainable development in its medium-term strategy for 2008-2013. Following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012, sustainable development was further highlighted as one of the two overarching objectives of the organization's new medium-term strategy for the period 2014-2021, with a view to enhancing its contribution to sustainable development in an even more holistic and cross-sectoral manner.

39. As the environmental pillar of the United Nations system, UNEP represents a special case. Its medium-term strategy for 2014-2017 continues the vision of the previous 2010-2013 strategy. The strategy is derived from the UNEP mandate to be the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment.

40. In other organizations, there is increasing awareness and recognition of the integrated nature of development and the interconnectedness of the related economic, social and environmental dimensions. For example, ESCWA has adopted inclusive and sustainable development as its overarching institutional objective in its 2014-2015 strategic framework. It has also adopted a framework to ensure that its 2016-2017 work programme addresses the integration of sustainable development at the design stage.

41. That awareness is not only seen in the strategic plans of entities with relatively broad mandates but also among entities with specialized mandates and unique expertise in clearly defined sectors. For example, the twelfth general programme of work of the World Health Organization reflects on future challenges and opportunities, including the global economic downturn, urbanization, demographic dynamics and environmental risks.

42. References in the strategic plans to sustainable development or to the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development vary in terms of depth and context. In some cases, sustainable development and the outcome document are referred to as guiding visions. For example, the UNDP strategic plan for the period 2014-2017 acknowledges that the world is undergoing an unprecedented transition and that a rethink of the notion of development is required. Sustainable development is now defined as the central area of work, which reflects a more integrated vision in comparison to previous strategic plans, such as the one for the period 2008-2011. This is evidenced by the outcomes and outputs included in the integrated results and resources framework. The first outcome of UNDP strategic plan is that growth and development are inclusive and sustainable. Similarly, UNFPA emphasizes that the development of its strategic plan was shaped by, inter alia, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012.

43. Other draft strategic plans highlight in general terms the connection between their agency-specific mandates and sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of such areas of work in the post-Millennium Development Goal era. UNICEF states, for example, that healthy, safe and well-educated children are essential for a sustainable planet, and vice versa. Today's children and those of future generations must be nurtured so that they contribute to sustainable development. The World Tourism Organization's strategic white paper for 2014-2015 notes that the contribution of tourism to the global sustainable development agenda through the creation of conditions for competitive and sustainable tourism cuts across the three dimensions of sustainable development.

44. In some cases, although the wording "sustainable development" is not mentioned, the approach taken to address agency-specific mandates can be seen as a reflection of the concept of sustainable development. For example, the World Food Programme aims to deploy multidimensional interventions to address food insecurity and malnutrition, which are critically important to breaking the intergenerational cycle of hunger by facilitating the access of poor people to food, education and health services.

45. Overall, the approach taken and level of priority given to the mainstreaming of sustainable development vary significantly from one agency to another. Nevertheless, there are now many examples of strategic plans that take an integrated approach to ensuring that economic, social and environmental dimensions are

systematically mainstreamed in strategic plans, from objectives through to outcomes, outputs and indicators. Nevertheless, there is a need to further clarify how this can be done system-wide. For example, an important step would be to identify and report on joint outputs among several organizations.

B. United Nations system operational activities

46. Mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development in the United Nations system also requires making changes at the country and programme levels. The United Nations Development Group is revising its guidelines on the development of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks with a view to strengthening their sustainable development content. The effort is an important element in the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the policies, tools and guidance of the United Nations Development Group. It will occur in parallel with the development of case studies on strengthening normative and operational linkages within the United Nations.

47. The 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy review recognized the achievements of a number of pilot programme countries in implementing, on a voluntary basis, the "Delivering as one" initiative. "Delivering as one" is an important initiative for enhancing the coherence, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the United Nations development system at country level (resolution 67/226, para. 134). Benefits from the "Delivering as one" initiative are expected, especially on cross-cutting issues and in the achievement of strategic results.

48. The United Nations Development Group believes that the "Delivering as one" initiative is a tool that can enhance coordination, facilitate access to the range of mandates and capacities of the United Nations system and leverage the comparative advantages of each agency. It can also allow agencies to better plan, manage and deliver on shared results. Although no specific reference is made to sustainable development, the initiative can be expected to be conducive to the mainstreaming of the three dimensions in the work of the United Nations system at the country and regional levels.

49. A survey conducted in 2013 among United Nations resident coordinators by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs revealed that 92 out of 109 countries fall into one of the following categories: a "Delivering as one" pilot country, a self-starter, a Government requesting to join the "Delivering as one" initiative or a Government actively considering joining the "Delivering as one" initiative.

50. A review of nine country-level planning initiatives that were started in 2013 and 2014 was conducted for the present report. The initiatives were either traditional United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, "Delivering as one" programmes or United Nations Development Assistance Framework action plans.[3] Given the usual time needed to develop and finalize a United Nations Development Assistance Framework, it is reasonable to assume that most of the frameworks that came into effect in 2013 were already in an advanced form or ready for adoption at the time of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012, making it impossible for them to refer to the mandates of the Conference on the mainstreaming of sustainable development. The outcome document of the

[3] Belize, Bhutan (draft), Guinea-Bissau, India, Lesotho, Liberia, Niger, Pakistan and Uganda.

Conference was not, therefore, mentioned in the documents reviewed. The Millennium Development Goals still constitute the main frame of reference for the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks.

51. Nevertheless, some United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks still succeed in capturing the core concept of sustainable development by recognizing the multidimensional nature of development challenges and the importance of multisectoral intervention. For example, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework of India emphasizes that multidimensional problems require multidisciplinary approaches. Similarly, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework of Belize states that "development challenges, including systemic conundrums and fixable problems, can be found across sector, gender, geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic and lifecycle areas and contexts".

52. The concept of sustainability appears mostly, however, in the context of the environment. Nearly all the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and the "Delivering as one" programmes refer to "sustainable economic growth" or "environmental sustainability"; many state that environmental sustainability, which is one of the five programming principles of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, is applied in developing the frameworks and programmes. For example, at the outcome level, Liberia adopts sustainable natural resources utilization as a priority. Likewise, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Lesotho has a cluster on the environment, natural resources and climate change.

53. Overall, despite of the increased recognition of the need for an integrated approach and the importance of sustainability, a major shift in the way programming is done at the country level is not being observed. Similar to strategic planning at the Headquarters level, there seem to be varying levels of understanding about sustainable development and its implications for the strategic orientations and modus operandi of the United Nations system at the country level.

54. Nearly all United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks stress the United Nations value added in terms of its advisory and capacity-building role as a neutral partner. As a result, the United Nations is well positioned to advise Governments on sustainable development policies and institutions. This must be done by exploring and building on the synergy of various United Nations entities. Moreover, efforts already under way in that regard must be stepped up.

C. Challenges for the funds, programmes and specialized agencies

55. The vision embodied in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development challenges the United Nations development system to deepen system-wide coherence. This is rendered more difficult by the way the United Nations system is organized. Each of the funds, programmes, specialized agencies and other entities of the United Nations system are still primarily vertically accountable to their respective boards, governing bodies and committees. Some degree of horizontal system-wide accountability has been achieved for operational activities at the country level, notably through the "Delivering as one" process. Recent coordination among United Nations entities in the follow-up to the quadrennial comprehensive policy review through their strategic planning is also an important move in that direction. Greater determination and innovative approaches

will be needed in order for organizations to work better together and ensure that sustainable development and integrated approaches guide the work of the United Nations system as a whole.

56. Mainstreaming sustainable development also requires a flexible workforce that is able to address development challenges from all dimensions of sustainable development. Staff capacity assessments undertaken in several programme countries show growing demand from programme country Governments for specialized policy advisory support from the United Nations system to deal with emerging global challenges. Entities should be encouraged to develop inter-organizational cooperation projects and initiatives and flexible arrangements for pooling staff, and to establish common partnership strategies for acquiring human resources with the necessary expertise for both long- and short-term assignments, which are becoming increasingly intersectoral and interdisciplinary.

57. There is also a critical need to build the capacities and skills of United Nations system staff at the country level to help Governments in adopting policy approaches that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. Training and advisory services would be needed to equip Governments. These could be provided in the form of either internal arrangements for knowledge-sharing or external technical advice.

VI. Role of quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms in supporting the promotion of sustainable development

58. The adoption of quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms is an important way to advance the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions in the United Nations system. Such mechanisms aim to avoid, mitigate or minimize the adverse social and environmental impacts of programmes and projects and to produce positive outcomes for people and the environment. The intention is to strengthen the institutional effectiveness of each United Nations entity with a view to helping it to deliver on existing mandates and achieve sustainable results. Consequently, while such mechanisms are not about defining strategic orientations or programmatic priorities related to sustainable development, they contribute to the achievement of results that are sustainable. Pioneering work has been carried out in that regard by the World Bank Group, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and UNDP.

59. The World Bank Group and other multilateral development banks view safeguards as a mandatory framework for assessing the impact of their investment projects. Safeguards complement national policies and the World Bank also has environmental and social measures that apply to other forms of World Bank assistance. The objectives of safeguard policies are threefold: to inform decision-making; to integrate environmental and social considerations into project design; and to support public consultation and disclosure (see box 3).

Box 3
World Bank Group safeguard policies

The World Bank Group uses two policy frameworks: the safeguards framework of the World Bank, largely for the public sector; and the performance standards framework of the International Finance Corporation and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency for the private sector. The two policy frameworks share similar objectives in that the World Bank seeks to avoid, mitigate or minimize the adverse environmental and social impacts of projects, and to ensure that the projects are environmentally sound and sustainable.

The World Bank uses its convening ability, financial instruments and intellectual resources to embed its environmental and social commitment across all of its activities. The commitments range from global engagement in issues such as climate change and gender equality, to ensuring that environmental and social considerations underpin all of the World Bank's sector strategies, operational policies and country dialogue.

At the project level, the World Bank's global aspirations translate into the overarching principle that the organization will look beyond doing no harm to people and the environment to maximizing developmental opportunities for all, particularly the poor and the vulnerable, and safeguarding the well-being of all natural and living resources.

There are a range of safeguard policies ensuring that World Bank operations do not harm people or the environment. Key policies relate to, for example, carrying out environmental assessments, safeguarding natural habitats, engaging and protecting indigenous peoples, and avoiding and mitigating involuntary resettlement. The safeguard policies are currently being updated.

60. GEF recently developed minimum standards and safeguards based on those of the World Bank, with some changes, which have to be met by grantees in order to receive funding, with a view to ensuring that funds are used properly (see box 4 below). Among the core safeguard standards are the need to have environmental and social impact assessment systems in place, in addition to an accountability and grievance mechanism.

Box 4
Global Environment Facility policy on minimum environmental and social safeguards

A key GEF principle is that GEF-financed operations that achieve benefits in one area should not lead to adverse environmental or social impacts in other areas. Every effort should be made to avoid adverse impacts, and if avoidance is not feasible, they should be minimized, mitigated or offset. All implementers of GEF projects should also demonstrate sufficient dedication to sustainable development. Minimum requirements that serve as a key benchmark for the accreditation of GEF

project agencies include: conducting environmental and social impact assessments; protecting natural habitats; avoiding, minimizing or managing involuntary resettlement; and preventing adverse impacts on indigenous peoples. Other requirements relate to pest management, preserving physical cultural resources and ensuring the safety of dams.

Accountability measures and grievance systems should be designed to ensure the enforcement of policies and related systems, as well as receipt of and timely responses to complaints.

The GEF secretariat systematically assesses whether and how GEF agencies meet the relevant GEF standards and minimum requirements. GEF agencies should prove that they have sufficient implementation capacity to apply relevant policies, procedures, standards and guidelines to their projects or a clear track record of their implementation experience Of the nine GEF agencies, only one of the multilateral development banks meets all of the minimum requirements identified by GEF, while none of the five agencies of the United Nations system meets them all. All are in the process of implementing action plans to achieve compliance.

61. UNDP is also quite advanced in developing its own social and environmental standards and a related compliance review and dispute resolution process. Compliance with social and environmental standards are included as an indicator of organizational effectiveness in the integrated results and resources framework for the UNDP strategic plan for the period 2014-2017. The standards are also included as one of the seven quality criteria contained in the UNDP project-level quality assurance framework. The approach is intended to help the organization to strengthen organizational effectiveness and quality assurance to enhance the achievement of national development results (see box 5).

Box 5
United Nations Development Programme: social and environmental standards

The objectives of the draft UNDP social and environmental standards and associated accountability framework are to provide the policies, tools and systems needed to: strengthen the social and environmental outcomes of programmes and projects; avoid adverse impacts on people and the environment; minimize, mitigate and manage adverse impacts where avoidance is not possible; strengthen capacities for managing social and environmental risks; and address complaints from project-affected people. At the heart of the standards are the three normative United Nations Development Group principles: a human-rights based approach, gender equality and environmental sustainability. The cross-cutting principles provide the foundation for a set of project-level standards that include:

- Biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource management
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Community health, safety and working conditions
- Cultural heritage
- Displacement and resettlement
- Indigenous peoples
- Pollution prevention and resource efficiency

The proposed standards also outline a policy delivery process that includes screening, assessment, management, stakeholder engagement, dispute resolution, access to information, monitoring, reporting and compliance.

The standards will be underpinned by a social and environmental compliance review process to respond to claims of non-compliance by UNDP with applicable environmental and social policies; and a dispute resolution process to ensure that individuals, peoples and communities affected by UNDP projects have access to appropriate dispute resolution procedures for hearing and addressing project-related disputes.

62. It is anticipated that additional global funds, such as the Green Climate Fund, would also require that some form of fiduciary standards or safeguards be in place for their grantees.

63. Several United Nations entities are thus embarking on efforts to introduce social and environmental safeguards and standards. In order to help to ensure increased coordination and coherence, the Environment Management Group is currently elaborating guidance for United Nations system agencies — building on existing practice and lessons learned within the system — on how to implement the framework for advancing environmental and social sustainability (see para. 29 above). One of the key benefits of that process has been the opportunity to strengthen the network of professionals across the United Nations system working on environmental and, to some extent, social sustainability issues, and to provide a mechanism to exchange best practices and lessons learned.

VII. Role of inspections and independent evaluations

64. Independent evaluations and inspections have an important role to play in the process of mainstreaming the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in the United Nations development system. Evaluations can also help national Governments in developing improved policy approaches in support of the implementation of sustainable development goals. Recently, the United Nations system has been making increased efforts to link the communities involved in evaluations to those engaged in mainstreaming sustainable development.

65. While accountability systems have traditionally been mostly vertical within individual development agencies, United Nations system organizations are increasingly undertaking joint approaches. Collaborative approaches to evaluation help to instil a sense of horizontal mutual accountability for results and build coherence at the system level, and can help address important knowledge gaps — all of which can help better integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. Such approaches are also an important tool for informing United Nations reform initiatives and high-level policy discussions (see box 6).

Box 6
Examples of joint evaluations

The ongoing joint evaluation of joint gender programmes in the United Nations system is intended to provide credible and useful evaluative information on the added value and worth of joint gender programmes in the United Nations system. It also aims to identify key lessons learned, challenges and best practices related to joint gender programmes, with a view to improving those programmes. Ultimately, the evaluation aims to support future policy and guidance on the design, implementation and evaluation of joint gender programmes, and enhance the contribution of the United Nations system to advancing gender equality at the country level. Eight organizations are engaged in the evaluation.

UNEP, FAO and UNDP are conducting a joint evaluation of the United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD programme). The joint evaluation is intended to make a broad and representative assessment of the programme's performance in terms of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and, to the extent possible, impact.

66. Important advances are expected to result from the 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. In its resolution 67/226, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to establish an interim coordination mechanism for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system composed of the Joint Inspection Unit, the United Nations Evaluation Group, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of Internal Oversight Services.

67. The interim coordination mechanism is intended to support system-wide coherence and to progressively enable the assessment of whether the United Nations system is efficiently and effectively responding to global, regional and country level needs and priorities, and achieving internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. The focus will be on, in particular, programmatic and operational synergies between different parts of the United Nations system. The purpose is to enhance accountability and learning to inform strategy and policy development. The interim coordination mechanism would be

ideally suited to evaluating whether the United Nations system is mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development in specific areas of its work.

68. The General Assembly also recently adopted a new policy for independent system-wide evaluation of United Nations operational activities for development (resolution 68/229, para. 8). In that regard, it decided that two pilot evaluations would be conducted in 2014 on: meta-evaluation and synthesis of United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication; and evaluation of the contribution of the United Nations development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals". The interim coordination mechanism will be used to oversee the pilot evaluations and report on lessons learned. This will be an important opportunity to evaluate a sustainable development perspective.

69. In a few years, Member States may decide to review progress made by the United Nations system in integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in its work. To prepare the ground for such evaluations, it is important that benchmarks and indicators are set up early. This would apply not only to specific programmes or policies, but also to a system-wide action plan or framework for mainstreaming sustainable development, should it be decided to develop one.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

70. Strengths, challenges and gaps identified in the 2013 report of the Secretary-General report remain relevant to the current discussion on mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development. Although a more integrated approach is needed, supported by several coordination mechanisms and good practices, obstacles and challenges persist. These include unclear and inconsistent terminology, sectoral silos, imbalances among the three dimensions, a lack of impact assessment processes and mechanisms, and resource constraints.

71. One of the most important developments since the previous report has been the inauguration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The forum will give impetus to integrating sustainable development as an overarching framework for all United Nations system intergovernmental bodies and organizations. The forum will, like the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, require support from the United Nations system to bring further conceptual clarity to the mainstreaming approach and to identify subsequent implications for mandates, plans and implementation modalities.

72. While there has been some progress in updating the strategic plans of the funds, programmes and agencies to reflect the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012, more work remains to be done to mainstream sustainable development in United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and the "Delivering as one" programmes at the country level. Progress may be expected as a result of further inter-agency collaboration with the High-level Committee on Programmes, the High-level Committee on Management and the United Nations Development Group. Also important is the ongoing work by CEB and its high-level committees in developing a set of options on how best the United Nations system can support Member States as the

international community strives to transition to a new, universal development agenda centred on sustainable development, including implementation at the country level.

73. Work undertaken in developing quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms, and in the area of joint evaluations, has been promising. It should catalyse more action towards system-wide monitoring and harmonized reporting. Additional safeguard policies should be adopted by a number of other global funds.

74. Beyond operational activities, intellectual leadership is crucial to addressing the systemic issues and shortcomings in development theory and practice that have reinforced unsustainable development paths. In that regard, organizational culture and mindset changes are needed to produce the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and collaboration needed to advance understanding and support countries in the design of their own national strategies.

75. It is recommended that Member States:

(a) Welcome efforts by CEB to continue promoting policy coherence and system-wide coordination for accelerating the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system;

(b) Call upon the United Nations system to accelerate efforts to mainstream sustainable development into strategic plans and programmes at the country level;

(c) Encourage efforts by the United Nations Evaluation Group to study how evaluation can best contribute to mainstreaming sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system;

(d) Call upon the United Nations system to establish a common repository of environmental and social assessments and related lessons learned;

(e) Encourage individual United Nations system organizations to champion the mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions, thus experimenting with new approaches and driving progress;

(f) Request the Secretary-General to report back on progress to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council and to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, in consultation with the United Nations system.